

The Philosophical Roots of the Marx-Bakunin Conflict

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“Again, I’m not enough of a Marx scholar to pretend to an authoritative judgement. My impression, for what it is worth, is that the early Marx was very much a figure of the late Enlightenment, and the later Marx was a highly authoritarian activist, and a critical analyst of capitalism, who had little to say about socialist alternatives. But those are impressions.” *Noam Chomsky*

THE TEMPESTUOUS relation between Marx and Bakunin is a well known legacy of the history of western socialism. As co-members of the International Working Men’s Association, they seem to have devoted as much energy to battling one another as their common enemy, the capitalist system, culminating in Marx’s successful campaign to expel Bakunin from the organization. While at times engaging in cordial relations, they nevertheless harbored uncomplimentary mutual assessments. According to Marx, Bakunin was “a man devoid of all theoretical knowledge” and was “in his element as an intriguer”,¹ while Bakunin believed that “... the instinct of liberty is lacking in him [Marx]; he remains from head to foot, an authoritarian”.²

For some, the intensity of the conflict has been puzzling, given that the two authors seem to be struggling for identical goals. Convinced that capitalism is predicated on the exploitation of workers by capitalists, they were equally dedicated to fighting for a socialist society where economic classes would be abolished and all individuals would have the opportunity to develop all of their creative capacities. Hence, both envisioned socialism as eliminating the division of labor, especially between mental and manual work, and between men and women. In other words, the work process was to be transformed so that all workers would take an active role in the organization, design and implementation of it. Moreover, both argued that the oppressed must liberate themselves – one should not expect any benevolent impulses from members of the ruling,

capitalist class; and to insure success, the revolution must assume an international scope. Finally, they agreed that the State was an instrument of class oppression, not some neutral organ that equitably represented everyone’s interests, and in the final analysis must be abolished. The 1871 Paris Commune offered, in their opinion, a model to be emulated.

However, their most profound point of disagreement centered on their conflicting analyses of the State. Most importantly, while Marx envisioned a transitional stage between capitalism and a fully mature communist society, which included a state in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat (i.e., a workers’ state), Bakunin adamantly rejected the establishment of any kind of state, including a workers’ state. In fact, this rejection is the defining principle of the school of anarchism, a term that literally translates as “no government”. For Bakunin, the only consistent, revolutionary option was to move immediately to a fully mature communist society which, both authors agreed, would be distinguished by the absence of a state. As a corollary to this disagreement, Marx supported attempts by independently organized workers to pursue their class interests by pressing for reforms within the bourgeois state – for example, for a reduction in the length of the working day – arguing that such victories would promote class consciousness, whereas Bakunin contested this proposal on the grounds that any political engagement whatsoever would constitute a perversion of the revolutionary movement and instead advocated complete abstention from the bourgeois political arena. The proper form of a revolutionary organization was also a point of dispute. Bakunin enthusiastically created secret societies as catalysts for a revolutionary upsurge while Marx flatly rejected them. Finally, the two contested the proper role of the peasants in a revolutionary movement. Bakunin argued that they might play a leading role while Marx designated the proletariat as the exclusive, leading revolutionary agent.

Because of the preponderance of the points of

agreement, some commentators have resorted to personality flaws to account for the interminable disharmony that plagued their relation. For example, Bakunin has been accused of being both anti-Semitic and anti-Germanic while Marx has been considered to suffer from an incurable strain of rigid authoritarianism. A more promising line of explanation of their intractable differences, however, lies in an investigation into the profoundly divergent philosophical frameworks that served as the points of departure for their respective political analyses. As will be shown below, their foundational concepts are so incompatible that even their points of agreement are rendered more illusory than substantive.

Bakunin's Philosophic Positions

Some of the important philosophical assumptions Bakunin employed in his approach to human reality were borrowed from the European Enlightenment, particularly the empiricist branch of this tradition, so a proper appreciation for his framework requires a brief excursion into its principles.

Having witnessed the phenomenal success of the natural sciences with such practitioners as Galileo and Newton, among others, many Enlightenment philosophers were inspired to transpose both the method and guiding assumptions of the natural sciences onto the domain of human behavior. These borrowed assumptions included the conviction that different kinds of natural objects contain their unique and defining fixed essence; objects interact with one another according to immutable mechanical laws of cause and effect; and after careful observation of individual interactions, the appropriate laws can be conclusively identified and codified. Consequently, the assumption was commonly adopted by members of the Enlightenment that humans are entirely natural creatures along the lines of other natural species and accordingly embody a unique and permanent essence and exhibit behavior that is entirely determined by natural causes. This approach was highlighted by the popular recourse to the concept of "the state of nature". As a state that either literally or figuratively preceded the formation of organized societies, it purported to offer a glimpse into human nature in its purely "natural" state, prior to alterations resulting from the impact of society. Philosophers during this period, which coincided with the rise of capitalism, almost universally described humans as individualistic, autonomous and independent and to one degree or another strongly inclined to pursue their own self interest, in conformity with the prevailing bourgeois norms.

Bakunin deviated somewhat from this philosophic tradition by rejecting the description of humans as essentially individualistic. For example, he mocked the conception of society as originating by means of isolated, independent

individuals contracting with one another, labeling this version a philosophic "fiction", and argued instead that humans were naturally social and always lived in communities. But he profoundly subscribed to the view that humans should be regarded on the same theoretical plane as other natural objects and that consequently human behavior was governed entirely by mechanical, natural laws. The following quotations offer a sample of this outlook:

"There are a good many laws which govern it [society] without its being aware of them, but these are natural laws, inherent in the body social... [T]hey have governed human society ever since its birth; independent of the thinking and the will of the men composing the society."³

"[Natural laws] ... constitute our being, our whole being, physically, intellectually, and morally: we live, we breathe, we act, we think, we wish only through these laws."⁴

"History and statistics prove to us that the social body, like any other natural body, obeys in its evolutions and transformations general laws which appear to be just as necessary as the laws of the physical world."⁵

"Man himself is nothing but Nature.... Nature envelopes, permeates, constitutes his whole existence."⁶

Bakunin's ethics at first glance seem to be a logical corollary to his general naturalistic framework in so far as he identifies what is morally good with what is natural:

"The *moral law* ... is indeed an actual law ... because it emanates from the very nature of human society, the root basis of which is to be sought not in God but in animality."⁷

"I speak of that justice which is based solely upon human conscience, the justice which you will rediscover deep in the conscience of everyman, even the conscience of the child and which translates itself into simple *equality*."⁸

In other words, justice is a natural human sentiment which permanently resides in the human constitution.

Bakunin's definition of evil, however, was not altogether consistent. On the one hand, he seems to have followed the empiricist tradition by identifying it with what is also natural: "We know very well, in any case, that what we call good and bad are always, one and the other, the natural results of natural causes, and that consequently one is as inevitable as the other."⁹ On the other hand, perhaps because he found it politically advantageous, Bakunin also identified evil, not with a natural impulse or sentiment, but with what is "unnatural", thereby creating a dualistic universe that was not entirely captured by natural laws. What lay outside these laws was the unnatural, the artificial, a domain which consequently could persevere only by constant recourse to force and coercion: "We must distinguish well

between natural laws and authoritarian, arbitrary, political, religious, criminal, and civil laws which the privileged classes have established....”¹⁰

One final important component of Bakunin’s philosophic arsenal is his notion of freedom. We shall see that when Marx and Bakunin mention this term, they have in mind two entirely different concepts. Bakunin’s understanding of this term contains several important facets. For example, for Bakunin, acting freely means, above all, acting “naturally” or according to one’s natural impulses: “The liberty of man consists solely in this: that he obeys natural laws because he has *himself* recognized them as such, and not because they have been externally imposed upon him by any extrinsic will whatever, divine or human, collective or individual.”¹¹ In other words, this definition rests on the conception of humans as natural creatures governed by natural laws. To act naturally is simply to be spontaneous, to be “oneself”: “Once more, Life, not science, creates life; the spontaneous action of the people themselves alone can create liberty.”¹²

The identification of freedom with spontaneity or impulsive behavior then leads to a second feature of Bakunin’s definition. He is embracing a conception of freedom that can be exercised by an single individual, isolated from a human community. One can act spontaneously entirely alone; it does not, for example, require a special, acquired mental capacity. Consequently, for Bakunin, freedom was an attribute of individuals, not of humans constituting a collectivity:

“Liberty ... consists in my being entitled, as a man, to obey no other man and to act only on my own judgment.”¹³

“*Liberty* is the absolute right of all adult men and women to seek no sanction for their actions except their own conscience and their own reason, to determine them only of their own free will, and consequently to be responsible for them to themselves first of all, and then to society of which they are a part, but only in so far as they freely consent to be a part of it.”¹⁴

However, because he viewed humans as naturally social, at times he tried to take this understanding of freedom and demonstrate that it could operate consistently in a human community:

“I am a fanatical lover of liberty.... I do not mean that formal liberty which is dispensed, measured out, and regulated by the State.... Nor do I mean that individualist, egoist, base, and fraudulent liberty extolled by the school of Jean Jacques Rousseau and every other school of bourgeois liberalism, which considers the rights of all, represented by the State, as a limit for the rights of each.... No, I mean the only liberty worthy of the name, the liberty which implies the full development of all the material, intellectual, and moral capacities latent in everyone of us; the liberty which knows no other restrictions but

those set by the laws of our own nature. Consequently there are, properly speaking, no restrictions, since these laws are not imposed upon us by any legislator from outside, alongside, or above ourselves. These laws are subjective, inherent in ourselves; they constitute the very basis of our being.... [T]hat liberty of each man which does not find another man’s freedom a boundary but confirmation and vast extension of his own; liberty through solidarity, in equality.”¹⁵

Leaving aside the question whether this formulation is consistent with his earlier versions, Bakunin is basically arguing that it is our nature to live together in equality, cooperating with one another, where no one exploits or is exploited. Hence, if I am acting naturally and consequently freely, then I am not exploiting my neighbor, thereby allowing my neighbor to live naturally and freely. In this way one individual’s freedom serves as a confirmation and extension of another. But still, this conception of freedom is grounded on the individual: “... collective liberty and prosperity exist only so far as they represent the sum of individual liberties and prosperities.”¹⁶

To summarize Bakunin’s philosophy, he is operating, by and large, within the naturalistic framework established by the empiricist current of the Enlightenment. Humans are conceived as embodying a permanently fixed nature with behavior basically determined by natural laws. This state of affairs is then identified with what is good. However, when coercion enters into the relations among people, we enter the realm of the unnatural. We are alienated from our natural condition and we lose our freedom.

The Philosophy of Marx

While Bakunin’s major theoretical assumptions were firmly rooted in materialist Enlightenment philosophy, Marx was impacted by this tradition for the most part only after it underwent a significant transformation in the hands of Hegel. Most importantly, Hegel rejected the Enlightenment conviction that humans are a natural species, conforming to the same kind of permanently fixed laws as the rest of the natural world. Instead, he postulated a vision of humanity engaged in a developmental process, constantly transforming and recreating itself in its struggle to become increasingly rational. Moreover, this undertaking was conceived as a collective endeavor since rationality, in the final analysis, is an attribute that requires, both for its original emergence and its continual exercise, the contribution of the entire species. For example, each new generation builds on the rational accomplishments of its predecessors, and in this way humans gradually succeed in creating a scientific grasp of reality. Finally, in Hegel’s opinion, this historical process culminates in a state of consummate rationality when humanity acquires self-knowledge. Here

humans achieve the capacity to regulate their interactions according to conscious, rational canons and have come to understand themselves as a rational species in a collective sense.

Marx adopted Hegel's vision of humans engaged in a collective undertaking but argued in favor of a different logic governing the process. For Hegel, the logic of history reflected the logic of human consciousness while Marx anchored the logic to a materialist substructure. In particular, for Marx, the manner in which humans go about satisfying their basic needs stamps a certain structure on the kind of society they create, the relations people have with one another, and the ideas they formulate about themselves and the surrounding world:

"In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."¹⁷

Moreover, this economic foundation contains a certain logic that unleashes a historical movement:

"... [W]e must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, the premise, namely that man must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history'. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. The second point is that the satisfaction of the first need ... leads to new needs; and this production of new needs is the first historical act."¹⁸

Like Hegel, Marx viewed this historical process as a collective endeavor since humans depend on one another both for the satisfaction of their basic physical needs and for the acquisition of higher needs:

"The object before us, to begin with, *material production*. Individuals producing in society – hence socially determined individual production, is, of course, the point of departure. The individual and isolated hunter and fisherman, with whom Smith and Ricardo begin, belongs among the unimaginative conceits of the eighteenth-century Robinsonades, which in no way express merely a reaction against over-sophistication and a return to a misunderstood natural life, as cultural

historians imagine. As little as Rousseau's *contrat social*, which brings naturally independent, autonomous subjects into relation and connection by contract, rests on such naturalism."¹⁹

While Bakunin posited a fixed, natural human essence, Marx, again following Hegel's lead, believed that human nature itself unfolded in a developmental process whereby the specific nature of one historical epoch was shed and a new nature was donned in a perpetual process of re-creation. As humans invent ever more sophisticated instruments to employ in the production process, they simultaneously transform themselves into more rational, universal individuals. At the beginning of history, the human species was hardly distinguishable from the rest of the animal kingdom; people were impulsive and lacked a conscious understanding of themselves and their environment. In other words, Bakunin's picture of humanity as a fixed, natural species only enjoys a fleeting validity at the earliest stage of history in Marx's perspective:

"This beginning is as animal as social life itself at this stage. It is mere herd-consciousness, and at this point man is only distinguished from the sheep by the fact that with him consciousness takes the place of instinct or that his instinct is a conscious one. This sheep-like or tribal consciousness receives its further development and extension through increased productivity, the increase of needs, and, what is fundamental to both of these, the increase of population."²⁰

But in the course of a communist revolution, a remarkable transformation takes place: the working class seizes control of the instruments of production and, for the first time, begins to direct them according to a conscious, rational plan:

"*All-round* dependence, this natural form of the *world-historical* co-operation of individuals, will be transformed by this communist revolution into the control and conscious mastery of these powers, which born of the action of men on one another, have till now overawed and governed men as powers completely alien to them."²¹

Here humans have abandoned their animal-like, impulsive existence in favor of a deliberate, rational regulation of their affairs. But conscious mastery of the productive forces can only be achieved when humans work in cooperation and harmony with one another, for as long as economic classes exist with their accompanying exploitation, relations of domination will substitute for rational discussion, thereby precluding the possibility of consciously controlling the productive forces:

"First, the productive forces appear as a world for themselves, quite independent of and divorced from the individuals, alongside the individuals: the reason for this that the individuals, whose forces they are, exist split up and in opposition to one another, whilst, on the other hand, these

forces are only real forces in the intercourse and association of these individuals.”²²

For this reason, the involvement of *all* individuals in the conscious control of the economy is an absolute prerequisite:

“In all appropriations up to now, a mass of individuals remained subservient to a single instrument of production; in the appropriation by the proletarians, a mass of instruments of production must be made subject to each individual, and property to all. Modern universal intercourse can be controlled by individuals, therefore, only when controlled by all.”²³

In stark contradiction to Bakunin, Marx believed that a successful revolution does not signal the recapturing of an original, natural essence that was stifled by the advent of the State and the creation of classes, but rather the creation of a *new* human being:

“Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.”²⁴

Thus, in the revolutionary process, the proletariat transforms itself from a passive class, following the dictates of the bourgeoisie, into a self-determining agent capable of taking the reins of history into its own hands and directing events according to a conscious plan. This represents the dawn of a new age in which individuals act collectively and consciously in determining social policy: “Only at this stage does self-activity coincide with material life, which corresponds to the development of individuals into complete individuals and the casting off of all natural limitations.”²⁵

We see, therefore, that Marx and Bakunin have developed two dramatically divergent visions of humanity. Bakunin adopted a static version of human nature, identifying it with what is physically natural while Marx posited a humanity that was undergoing maturation, leaving behind a more animal-like existence as it achieved ever higher levels of rationality and self-consciousness.

Their ethical doctrines correspondingly reflected these different conceptual frameworks. While Bakunin defined the good in terms of what is “natural,” Marx relativized ethical terms historically so that each new mode of production was seen to spawn new ethical assumptions:

“The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving,

thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behavior. The same applies to mental productions as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms.”²⁶

In the context of criticizing Gilbart, a 19th century British historian of economics who claimed that deriving profit from money through interest was “naturally” just, Marx argued that there is no natural justice, i.e., no justice that is permanently valid:

“To speak here of natural justice, as Gilbart does ... is nonsense. The justice of the transactions between agents of production rests on the fact that these arise as natural consequences out of the production relationships. The juristic forms in which these economic transactions appear as willful acts of the parties concerned, as expressions of their common will and as contracts that may be enforced by law against some individual party, cannot, being mere forms, determine this content. They merely express it. This content is just whenever it corresponds, is appropriate, to the mode of production. It is unjust whenever it contradicts that mode.”²⁷

Marx’s notion of freedom also involves a paradigm shift in relation to Bakunin and the empiricist school of the Enlightenment. There are two pivotal turns that Marx executed in departing from this tradition and in both cases he was following Hegel’s analysis.

First, for Marx, freedom does not amount to following one’s impulses or engaging in spontaneity. Impulses are a part of one’s natural constitution – they are not the product of choice. When we act impulsively, we act “naturally” and without conscious reflection. However, when we rationally and consciously direct our behavior, we ourselves, through thoughtful deliberation, determine our course of action. Marx accordingly allied himself with that sector of the Enlightenment that was represented, for example, by Kant and Rousseau, where both endorsed the autonomy of the subject:

“Really free working, e.g. composing, is at the same time precisely the most damned seriousness, the most intense exertion. The work of material production can achieve this character only (1) when its social character is posited, (2) when it is of a scientific and at the same time general character, not merely human exertion as a specifically harnessed natural force, but exertion as subject, which appears in the production process not in a merely natural, spontaneous form, but as an activity regulating all the forces of nature.”²⁸

Second, and connected with the first point, freedom is not a capacity that is exercised fundamentally by an individual; rather it is for Marx undertaken primarily by a community of people and in this respect his analysis deviates from Kant and Rousseau. Science, for example, is not a discipline that can be created or employed by an isolated individual. Humans existed for thousands of years before they were in a position to begin to engage in scientific thought, and many more thousands of years passed before they were able to create formal, scientific theories. And no progress could be made at all in this direction until humans developed the ability to build on the contributions of previous generations.

Moreover, because humans are dependent upon one another for the satisfaction of their needs, both physical and psychological, they are compelled to work with one another. Within capitalist society, rather than working with one another directly, cooperation is enforced indirectly by people competing against one another, each consulting only his or her private interest in determining which option to pursue. But such behavior entails that the structure people operate within does not become an object of critical reflection precisely because, from the vantage point of an isolated individual, it is impossible to alter. Hence, from this perspective society appears to be as inflexible as the law of gravity. But the goal of a socialist society is to invert this relation. Instead of individuals feeling powerless in the face of their own social institutions, by directly coming together through organized discourse, they place themselves in a position to alter these institutions according to their own needs and values. But this can only be accomplished when individuals are operating as a coordinated force, where they are discussing, debating and voting on which options to pursue, and where everyone has the opportunity to participate. Consequently a socialist society brings into play a new definition of freedom, and, in Marx's opinion, a superior conception: the collective, rational determination of social policy. "Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by blind forces of Nature."²⁹

Consequently, Bakunin's individualistic definition of freedom, in Marx's opinion, remains mired in the conceptual framework of bourgeois philosophy and simply sows confusion when transplanted onto a socialist foundation:

"Liberty [i.e. the bourgeois conception], therefore, is the right to do everything that harms no one else. The limits within which anyone can act *without harming* someone else are defined by law, just as the boundary between two fields is determined by a boundary post. It is a question of

the liberty of man as an isolated monad, withdrawn into himself.... But the [bourgeois] right of man to liberty is based not on the association of man with man, but on the separation of man from man. It is the *right* of this separation, the right of the *restricted* individual, withdrawn into himself."³⁰

In fact, this bourgeois conception of freedom, when compared to a more advanced socialist conception, is simply another form of slavery:

"Precisely the *slavery of civil society* is *in appearance* the greatest *freedom* because it is in appearance the fully developed *independence* of the individual, who considers as his *own* freedom the uncurbed movement, no longer bound by a common bond or by man, of the estranged elements of his life, such as property, industry, religion, etc., whereas actually this is his fully developed slavery and inhumanity."³¹

The differences between Marx's and Bakunin's definitions of freedom, in the final analysis, stem directly from their opposed philosophical presuppositions. For Bakunin, since humans are a natural species, it only makes sense to define freedom as acting naturally. But for Marx, since he regards humanity as in the process of lifting itself above nature, freedom is identified with collective, rational action.

One final cornerstone of Marx's philosophic foundation concerns his analysis of the laws of history. As we have seen, his historical, materialist approach committed him to emphasizing the role of economic conditions in determining the course of history. But while Bakunin argued that historical laws could be reduced to natural laws, thereby implying that humans have no more control over their destiny than natural objects, Marx postulated a dynamic relation between human intentions and the surrounding economic environment:

"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."³²

"It shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances."³³

Here, the material environment and human intentions conjoin to nudge, or hurl, as the case may be, history in a particular direction.

This dynamic relationship for Marx is rooted in the basic production process through which humans relate both to one another and to nature:

"Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both men and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a

form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway. We are not now dealing with those primitive instinctive forms of labour that remind us of the mere animal.... We presuppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality."³⁴

In other words, the economic foundation itself upon which history rests in Marx's system, includes the role of human consciousness as an irreducible moment.

Consequently, Marx's materialism does not commit him to a mechanical explanation where each historical event is conclusively determined by a preceding set of conditions, as in the natural sciences. Rather, the surrounding economic conditions establish certain parameters within which human intentions operate, thereby stamping a general logic on these intentions without entirely determining them. It is impossible, for example, to create a computer when one has only stone implements at one's disposal, but one is not compelled to create a computer even if all the necessary technology is available.

For this reason Marx insisted upon drawing a sharp boundary between nature, on the one hand, and history on the other:

"Nature does not produce on the one side owners of money or commodities, and on the other men possessing nothing but their own labour-power. This relation has no natural basis, neither is its social basis one that is common to all historical periods. It is clearly the result of a past historical development, the product of many economic revolutions, of the extinction of a whole series of older forms of social production."³⁵

And for this reason he was also critical of attempts to depict history as one more branch of the natural sciences:

"Does not the history of the productive organs of man [i.e. technology], of organs that are the material basis of all social organization, deserve equal attention [as the history of the organs of plants and animals]? And would not such a history be easier to compile, since, as Vico says, human history differs from natural history in this, that we have made the former, but not the latter? ... The weak points in the abstract materialism of natural science, a materialism that excludes history and its process, are at once evident from the abstract and ideological conceptions of its spokesmen, whenever they venture beyond the bounds of their own speciality."³⁶

The Dispute Over the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

With their divergent philosophical frameworks at least partially clarified, it becomes clearer why their political differences could not be resolved. Their respective political programs were tied to conflicting philosophical principles so that they were at times being pulled in diametrically opposed directions.

From Bakunin's perspective, the most important revolutionary act aimed at the destruction of the institution of the State: "We think that the necessarily revolutionary policy of the proletariat must have for its immediate and only object the destruction of States."³⁷ The State, by establishing the right of inheritance, creates economic classes and thereby introduces an "unnatural" dimension in human relations, a perversity, as it were, that can only be maintained through force which, by means of the military and the police, the State monopolizes. When the State is abolished and coercion is removed, people can immediately revert back to their "natural" condition and recapture their "natural" freedom. No transitional period is required. The dictatorship of the proletariat, as another State, would only serve to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Operating within his historical, materialist framework and placing economics first, Marx countered this analysis by arguing that the State, far from creating economic classes, was itself created by them, by the clash of opposing class interests. The ruling class, in order to consolidate its economic privileges, uses the State to create laws which enshrine its monopoly on wealth in a cloak of legal legitimacy, and it establishes a military apparatus that is prepared to implement these laws by brute force.

Consequently, from Marx's perspective, classes could persist beyond the destruction of the bourgeois state, although with some difficulty, and the bourgeoisie could survive even after its property has been expropriated. People who have enjoyed privileges are molded by them, they tend to view their elevated position as "natural," and accordingly seldom relinquish their assets voluntarily. As history as proven, they will often fight tenaciously to reinstate them. Hence, according to Marx, if the proletariat is truly determined to succeed, it must be prepared to use decisive force, if the situation demands. Therefore the working class must establish its own coercive apparatus, i.e. state, so that it can defend its interests and enforce a genuine form of majority rule. Otherwise it will find itself at the mercy of a counterrevolution.

In criticizing Marx's program of the dictatorship of the proletariat, Bakunin raises this challenge: "If the proletariat is to be the ruling class, one may ask whom will it govern? There must be yet another proletariat that will be subjected to

this new domination, this new state.”³⁸ Here Bakunin’s reaction stems from his belief that the State itself is the creator of classes so that whoever controls the state is identified with the ruling, capitalist class while those being victimized by it are the equivalent of the proletariat. But for Marx, as we just saw, the proletarian dictatorship is not aimed at any section of the working class but at the former bourgeoisie, which simply does not disappear overnight.

Bakunin, however, proceeds: “There are about forty million Germans. Are all forty million going to be members of the government?”³⁹ And Marx responds: “Certainly, for the thing begins with the self-government of the commune.”⁴⁰

This last criticism of Bakunin is connected with a fundamental misunderstanding of Marx’s program. Operating within an a-historical framework, Bakunin was quick to assume all states are basically the same. Hence, he concluded that Marx’s dictatorship of the proletariat was not essentially different from the bourgeois state: “... according to Mr. Marx’s theory the people not only must not destroy it [the State] but on the contrary must reinforce it and make it stronger....”⁴¹

But this was not Marx’s intention. In 1852, for example, in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx argued:

“This executive power with its enormous bureaucratic and military organization, with its ingenious state machinery, embracing wide strata, with a host of officials numbering half a million, this appalling parasitic body, which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores, sprang up in the days of the absolute monarchy, with the decay of the feudal system, which it helped to hasten.... Finally, in its struggle against the revolution, the parliamentary republic found itself compelled to strengthen, along with the repressive measures, the resources and centralization of governmental power. All revolutions perfected this machine instead of smashing it.”⁴²

Almost twenty years later he reiterated this position: “... If you look at the last chapter of my *Eighteenth Brumaire*, you will find that I declare: the next French Revolution will no longer attempt to transfer the bureaucratic-military apparatus from one hand to another, but to *smash* it, and this is the precondition for every real people’s revolution on the Continent.”⁴³

The determination to smash the bourgeois state was a cornerstone of Marx’s political program. Its destruction opens the door to the political participation of the entire working class where everyone can have a voice in shaping public policy. If the bourgeois state were to survive, the proletariat would remain hopelessly paralyzed in a bureaucratic quagmire.

Aside from the need of the dictatorship of the proletariat to guard against the bourgeoisie, Marx

envisioned the establishment of a socialist society as an arduous task, requiring a transitional period in which the groundwork could be laid for a radically new society. Not subscribing to any concept of a natural, pristine condition that could serve as a point of return, Marx conceived of the revolutionary process as one that actually involved the creation of a new human being, one that was capable of acting both socially and rationally. But such an achievement could not be secured instantaneously; considerable time and effort was required for it to mature.

“What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has *developed* on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it *emerges* from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.”⁴⁴

But in order for a moral and intellectual transformation in humans to take place, or, as mentioned above, “an alteration of man on a mass scale,” the proper economic conditions must exist because, as Marx persistently argued, humans are molded by their economic environment:

“He [Bakunin] understands nothing whatever about social revolution; all he knows about it is political phrases; its economic prerequisites do not exist for him. Since all the economic forms, developed or undeveloped, that have existed till now included the enslavement of the worker (whether in the shape of the wage-worker or the peasant, etc.) he presumes that a *radical revolution* is equally possible in all of them.”⁴⁵

These economic improvements would include the abolition of the division of labor, especially between mental and manual labor, and the development of the productive forces:

“And ... this development of productive forces ... is an absolutely necessary practical premise because without it *want* is merely made general, and with destitution the struggle for necessities and all the old filthy business would necessarily be reproduced; and furthermore, because only with this universal development of productive forces is a universal intercourse between men established, which ... finally has put world-historical, empirically universal individuals in place of local ones.”⁴⁶

Therefore, the dictatorship of the proletariat was also required since it could not be assumed that relations among people will immediately proceed smoothly. Time would be needed for humanity to recreate itself along more humanitarian principles. Then:

“... after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life, but life’s prime want, after the productive forces have also increased with the

all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banner: 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!'"⁴⁷

Organisational Differences

Another major point of dispute centers on the form of organization needed to wage a revolution.

Although Bakunin was a member of the International Working Men's Association, most of his organizing efforts were concentrated on the creation of secret societies which were governed by a top-down structure. The following quote gives a sense of the role Bakunin assigned to them and why they appeared to be a sensible alternative for him:

"This organization rules out any idea of dictatorship and custodial control. But for the very establishment of the revolutionary alliance and the triumph of revolution over reaction, *the unity of revolutionary thought and action must find an agent* in the thick of the popular anarchy which will constitute the very life and all the energy of the revolution. That agent must be *the secret universal association of international brothers*.

"This association stems from the conviction that revolutions are never made by individuals or even by secret societies. They come about of themselves, produced by the force of things, the tide of events and facts.... All that a well-organized secret society can do is first to assist the birth of the revolution by sowing ideas corresponding to the instincts of the masses, then to organize, not the army of the revolution – the army must always be the people – but a kind of revolutionary general staff made up of devoted, hardworking and intelligent men, and above all of sincere friends of the people, without ambition or vanity, and capable of acting as intermediaries between the revolutionary idea and the popular instinct.

"Therefore there should be no vast number of these individuals.... Two or three hundred revolutionaries are enough for the largest country's organization."⁴⁸

There are several important points contained in the above passage. First, the emphasis is placed on the instincts of the masses for the fuel that will erupt in a revolutionary upheaval. Second, there is no emphasis on organizing the masses themselves. Third, the secret societies act somewhat as midwives, assisting in the birth of the revolution but are certainly not considered the main engine of it. They engage in translating the instincts of the masses into revolutionary concepts. Fourth, precisely because these societies are in fact secret, they are not elected by the masses, but are self-appointed representatives of the masses. They themselves determine whether they are genuinely hardworking and intelligent. Using these prin-

ciples as his point of departure, Bakunin then criticized Marx for failing to appreciate the crucial role of instinct or temperament:

"Likewise, Marx completely ignores a most important element in the historic development of humanity, that is, the temperament and particular character of each race and each people, a temperament and a character which are themselves the natural product of a multitude of ethnological, climatological, economic and historic causes.... Among these elements ... there is one whose action is completely decisive in the particular history of each people; it is the intensity of the spirit of revolt.... This instinct is a fact which is completely primordial and animalistic.... [I]t is a matter of temperament rather than intellectual and moral character...."⁴⁹

And for this reason there is no need to educate the masses. In order to mount a revolution, Bakunin's self-appointed leaders must simply mix with the oppressed so that this instinct to revolt might be ignited. Then, because instincts are true and just, one can depend on them entirely to push the revolution to a successful conclusion. Consequently, Bakunin complained that Marx was actually contaminating this natural flow of events in that Marx was "ruining the workers by making theorists out of them".⁵⁰

For Marx, the revolutionary process was far more complicated, requiring ongoing education of the proletariat. For example, it was crucial for him that the proletariat acquire class consciousness because, without this consciousness, it would not come to the realization that the entire capitalist system must be abolished and replaced by a system that operates in the interests of working people, as opposed to a small, extremely wealthy minority. In other words, without class consciousness, members of the proletariat assume that their miserable condition is a function of their own individual initiative, or lack thereof, or simply bad luck, as opposed to resulting from naked class exploitation. But class consciousness is not simply gained instinctively since the bourgeoisie, for example, is relentlessly on a campaign to assert ideological hegemony by arguing that capitalism represents the highest achievement in individual freedom, fairness in the distribution of wealth, etc. For these reasons, Marx was always insistent on the importance of propaganda or education:

"To assure the success of the revolution one must have '*unity of thought and action*'. [Marx is quoting Bakunin.] The members of the International are trying to create this unity by propaganda, by discussion and the public organization of the proletariat. But all Bakunin needs is a secret organization of one hundred people, the privileged representatives of the *revolutionary idea*, the general staff in the background, self-appointed and commanded by the permanent 'Citizen B' [i.e., Bakunin]."⁵¹

But in order for education to take place, the working class must be organized, and one such venue is the trade union movement: "It is in trade unions that workers educate themselves and become socialists, because under their very eyes and every day the struggle with capital is taking place."⁵²

Moreover, for Marx, beyond their trade union experience, workers must be organized on a political level so that they can challenge the bourgeoisie for state power. A political party is the organ through which the working class develops and expresses its class consciousness. It is the instrument with which it articulates and promotes its *own* class interests in opposition to the bourgeoisie:

"Here, in order to be able to offer energetic opposition to the democratic petty bourgeois, it is above all necessary for the workers to be independently organised and centralised in clubs... The speedy organisation of at least a provincial association of the workers' clubs is one of the most important points for the strengthening and developing of the workers' party; the immediate consequence of the overthrow of the existing governments will be the election of a national representative assembly. Here the proletariat must see to it:

"I. that no groups of workers are barred on any pretext or by any kind of trickery on the part of local authorities or government commissioners.

"II. that everywhere workers' candidates are put up alongside the bourgeois-democratic candidates, that they are as far as possible members of the League, and that their election is promoted by all possible means. Even where there is no prospect whatever of their being elected, the workers must put up their own candidates in order to preserve their independence, to count their forces and to lay before the public their revolutionary attitude and party standpoint. In this connection they must not allow themselves to be bribed by such arguments of the democrats as, for example, that by so doing they are splitting the democratic party and giving the reactionaries the possibility of victory."⁵²

Furthermore, from Marx's perspective, these working class organizations must encompass the entire proletariat. The working class as a whole must become actively engaged so that the discussions and debates truly amount to "universal intercourse". If only some are engaged in the decision-making process, then the decisions will reflect only these special interests so that the decisions will not be universally valid.

"Thus things have now come to such a pass, that the individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces, not only to achieve self-activity, but, also, merely to safeguard their very existence... In all appropriations up to now, a mass of individuals remained subservient to a

single instrument of production; in the appropriation by the proletarians, a mass of instruments of production must be made subject to each individual, and property to all. Modern universal intercourse can be controlled by individuals, only when controlled by all."⁵³

Therefore, while Bakunin was intent on organizing secret societies and relying on the instincts of the masses to push the revolution to a successful conclusion, Marx was urging that the workers themselves become organized. These working class organizations not only serve as vehicles for education, but they have the potential to become powerful weapons aimed at challenging the bourgeoisie for state power. In the process of this struggle, workers not only deepen their self-consciousness as an oppressed class, but gradually acquire the realization that they are capable of seizing control of society and running it in their own interests.

Political Reforms

Bakunin consistently condemned all efforts on the part of the proletariat to improve its lot by pressing for specific legislation that seemed in its interest. The State, after all, was an unnatural excrescence, implying that any participation in it would only contaminate the revolutionary movement. Marx, on the other hand, not only regarded this political engagement as permissible but even, at times, as indispensable, provided that the conquest of state power was not on the immediate agenda, either because the objective conditions were lacking or because the proletariat had not already achieved the appropriate level of class consciousness and organization. Struggling for reforms involves a certain level of organized, self-determination and hence contributes to the transformation of the working class into active agents. Also, when these campaigns are successful, they can endow the working class with a sense of its own power, enhance its self-confidence, and consequently lead to even bolder initiatives in a revolutionary direction. Moreover, the legislation can in turn open up greater opportunities for working class self-activity, for example, by shortening the working day. Finally, as mentioned earlier, this kind of political engagement is an expression of, and contributes to, the development of class consciousness:

"On the other hand, however, every movement in which the working class as a *class* confronts the ruling classes and tries to constrain them by pressure from without is a political movement. For instance, the attempt by strikes, etc., in a particular factory or even in a particular trade to compel individual capitalists to reduce the working day, is a purely economic movement. On the other hand the movement to force through an eight-hour, etc. *law* is a *political* movement. And in this way, out of the separate economic movements of the

workers there grows up everywhere a *political* movement, that is to say, a *class* movement, with the object of enforcing its interests in a general form, in a form possessing general, socially coercive force.”⁵⁴

For Marx, the development of class consciousness is a slow process that traverses a number of stages. On the lowest level, a worker who is suffering from the relations of exploitation approaches the employer as an individual, pleading for ameliorated working conditions. After meeting with failure, workers eventually come to recognize that a more promising avenue lies in collective action, for example, in organizing a union and launching a strike. Here the individual’s consciousness rises one level as he or she realizes that co-workers are also suffering and collective action can be far more effective than the pleas of an isolated individual. But these struggles can in turn lead to action on a more universal plane where one realizes that one’s plight is not simply the function of a particular workplace but emanates from the capitalist system itself. Here, individuals recognize that all workers are suffering and that by organizing the entire working class, a powerful agent is created that has the capacity to change such laws as the length of the working day; and so on. The political arena offers an important opportunity for the proletariat to embark on this path of growth.

The Revolutionary Agent

Another strategical disagreement dividing Marx and Bakunin centered around the question of who would lead the revolution. Both agreed that the proletariat would play a key role, but for Marx the proletariat was the exclusive, leading revolutionary agent while Bakunin entertained the possibility that the peasants and even the lumpenproletariat (the unemployed, common criminals, etc.) could rise to the occasion. Bakunin argued, for example, that the peasants were a revolutionary class for three reasons: (1) They have retained “the simple, robust temperament and the energy germane to the folk nature.” (2) They work with their hands and despise privilege. And (3) as toilers they have common interests with workers.⁵⁵ In other words, being close to nature, the peasants are less alienated from their true, natural essence since they have suffered less corruption by the evils of society. Bakunin adopted a similar argument in relation to the lumpenproletariat:

“By flower of the proletariat, I mean precisely that eternal ‘meat’, ... that great *rabble of the people* (underdogs, ‘dregs of society’) ordinarily designated by Marx and Engels in the picturesque and contemptuous phrase *lumpenproletariat*. I have in mind the ‘riffraff’, that ‘rabble’ almost unpolluted by bourgeois civilization, which carries in its inner being and in its aspirations ... all the

seeds of the socialism of the future....”⁵⁶

In both cases, Bakunin’s conclusions flow directly from his conviction that inherent in humanity is a natural essence which can be suppressed but never entirely extinguished. Those in society who are more distant from the State apparatus (the peasants are scattered throughout the countryside, the lumpenproletariat simply refuses to obey the laws) are accordingly natural leaders.

In contrast, Marx consistently argued that the proletariat alone was the revolutionary agent: “Of all classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product.”⁵⁷

Here again their different philosophical frameworks led these revolutionaries in opposed directions. Because Marx believed human nature was shaped by the economy, he analyzed the possible revolutionary agents by analyzing how the economy would influence their development. And economic considerations led him to conclude that the peasants could not play a leading revolutionary role. For example, they do not constitute a cohesive class. Some are large landowners and hire other peasants to work for them while the latter are often landless and destitute. Moreover, the desire for land by a majority of the peasants could serve as an anchor, holding them back from a truly revolutionary perspective. Rather than rallying for a thoroughgoing, socialist revolution where private ownership of land is abolished, they often veer in the direction of seeking to augment their own modest, private property land holdings at the expense of the large landowners.

But aside from these economic considerations, Marx also believed that the situation of the peasants prohibited them not only from attaining class consciousness, but from becoming a truly revolutionary class:

“The small holding peasants form a vast mass, the members of which live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with one another. Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse.... Their field of production, the small holding, admits of no division of labor in its cultivation, no application of science and, therefore, no diversity of development, no variety of talent, no wealth of social relationships. Each individual peasant family is almost self-sufficient; it itself directly produces the major part of its consumption and thus acquires its means of life more through exchange with nature than in intercourse with society. A small holding, a peasant and his family; alongside them another small holding, another peasant and another family.... In so far as millions

of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is a merely local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class.”⁵⁸

Marx was even less enthusiastic about the lumpenproletariat because it was not directly related to the production process at all, being comprised of the permanently unemployed, criminals, etc.

Conclusion

We can now see that when Marxists and anarchists refer to such concepts as “human nature” and “freedom”, they have diametrically opposed definitions in mind and therefore are frequently talking at cross-purposes. Bakunin’s notion of spontaneity stands starkly opposed to Marx’s notion of collective, rational action. Each author, armed with his own definition, could then logically categorize the other as a tyrant. One can understand, therefore, why Bakunin labeled Marx an “authoritarian” when Marx would not concede to Bakunin’s impulsive politics. Marx, on the other hand, viewed Bakunin’s conceptual framework as mired in an antiquated 18th century Enlightenment philosophy, lacking any historical dimension, theoretically inconsistent, and parading metaphysics as if it were materialism. As far as Marx was concerned, Hegel could easily have been speaking of Bakunin when he declared:

“Since the man of common sense makes his appeal to feeling, to an oracle within his breast, he is finished and done with anyone who does not agree; he only has to explain that he has nothing more to say to anyone who does not find and feel the same in himself. In other words, he tramples underfoot the roots of humanity. For it is in the nature of humanity to press onward to agreement with others; human nature only really exists in an achieved community of minds.”⁵⁹

Neither the early nor the later Marx was a figure of the late Enlightenment, a philosophic school which trumpeted the autonomy of the isolated individual, divorced from a human community. And Marx had little to say about socialist alternatives, except by suggesting broad parameters, since socialism, in the final analysis, is to be defined and created by the participants themselves, i.e. by “freely associated men” engaged in “universal intercourse” who in this way achieve “control and conscious mastery” of their lives.

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